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ABSTRACT

Mexican immigrant youth lag behind other immigrant groups in educational completion and achievement, but many resilient Mexican immigrant youth have overcome tough odds to succeed. This digest examines the research about resiliency and some promising programs for Mexican American youth. Resiliency theory identifies protective factors present in the families, schools, and communities of successful youth that may be missing in the lives of troubled youth. Five key protective factors are supportive relationships with caring adults; student characteristics such as self-esteem, motivation, and acceptance of responsibility; family factors such as parental support and involvement with school; community factors such as youth programs; and school factors such as academic success and prosocial skills training. Various promising programs help Mexican immigrant children increase their resiliency. Program strategies include placing high-risk students in college preparation classes with high-achieving peers; providing support and scholarships in schools with high dropout rates; providing support and parenting education to single mothers and low-income families of preschool children; promoting ethnic pride and community connections for Hispanic dropouts and juvenile offenders; emphasizing psychosocial interventions for Latino youth with disabilities and other risk factors; and focusing on attributes and skills needed for success at school and work. (Contains 18 references.) (SV)

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Mexican Immigrant Youth and Resiliency: Research and Promising Programs

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ERIC DIGEST

Recent RAND Corporation reports underscore the uneven educational achievement of various immigrant groups in the United States (Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996; Schoeni, McCarthy, & Vernez, 1996). Mexican immigrants lag behind other immigrants in educational completion, and they have scored lower on reading and math achievement tests than have White and immigrant Asian children (Kao & Tienda, 1995). The preponderance of data paints a gloomy picture of the status of Mexican immigrant youth, but at the same time, researchers are reporting the successes of many resilient youth who have overcome the toughest of odds to succeed. This Digest examines both the research about resiliency and some promising programs for Mexican immigrant youth.

Defining Resiliency

Resiliency theory identifies protective factors present in the families, schools, and communities of successful youth that often are missing in the lives of troubled youth (Krovetz, 1999). When at least some of these protective factors are present, children develop resiliency, that is, the ability to cope with adversity. According to Bonnie Benard (1991; 1997), there are at least four common attributes of resilient children:

- social competence
- problem-solving skills
- autonomy
- sense of purpose and future

Resiliency theory proposes that all of these attributes are present to some degree in most people. Whether they are strong enough to help individuals cope with adversity, however, depends on the presence of protective factors during childhood.

Research Studies

The research on psychological resilience begins with the classic study by Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith (1992). Over a 40-year period, they studied 700 at-risk Hawaiian residents born under adverse circumstances, including chronic poverty; about 200 of the sample were considered high risk. The sample was composed of poor children whose parents and grandparents had immigrated to Hawaii from Asia or Europe. Approximately two-thirds of the sample had various problems during childhood, while the other one-third showed no problems at all. By the time the study participants reached their mid-thirties, almost all (including many who had experienced problems) had become constructively motivated and responsible adults. A distinguishing factor shared by each resilient child was a long-term, close relationship with a caring, responsible parent or other adult. Only about 30 of the original group of 700 did not effectively "bounce back." Interestingly, the researchers found that socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds did not play a role.

Lingxin Hao and Melissa Bonstead-Bruns (1998) used National Education Longitudinal Survey data (based on children who were eighth graders in 1988) to examine family influences on children's achievement, paying special attention to ethnic variables. They found lower levels of parent-child interactions among immigrant Mexican Americans than among immigrant Asian Americans; however, immigrant Mexican students had one strong advantage: knowledge of their parents' language. Proficiency in the parental language significantly improved math achievement and grades.

Kimberly Gordon (1996) examined the self-concept and motivational patterns of 36 Hispanic youth in an urban school setting. The principal difference between resilient and nonresilient students was that the resilient youths had more faith in their cognitive abilities. The resilient youths excelled academically because they believed that they could understand the material and information presented in class and that they could do well on homework and tests.

Research in the fields of child and human development, effective schools, and competent communities reveals that successful development in any human system relates directly to the quality of relationships in the system and opportunities for participation in those relationships (Benard, 1991). Three key characteristics support productive development: caring relationships, communication of high expectations and positive beliefs, and opportunities for participation. Werner and Smith (1992) argued that the most important of these protective factors is a caring relationship with someone, regardless of whether that person is a parent, teacher, or community mentor.

Genevieve Johnson (1997) surveyed 38 inner-city principals and teachers regarding their personal and professional experiences with at-risk students who had demonstrated resiliency. The principals and teachers identified a broad range of compensatory factors focusing on the home, school, and community. These findings support Benard's study (1991).

In sum, the literature on resiliency identifies five key protective factors of families, schools, and communities:

- supportive relationships, particularly encouragement from school personnel and other adults
- student characteristics, such as self-esteem, motivation, and accepting responsibility
- family factors, such as parental support/concern and school involvement
- community factors, such as community youth programs (e.g., sports, clubs, hobbies)
- school factors, such as academic success and prosocial skills training

Promising Programs

A number of promising programs have helped Mexican immigrant children increase their resiliency. Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) in San Diego placed students from low-income, ethnic and linguistic minority backgrounds in college preparation classes along with high-achieving peers. The project resulted in higher college enrollment compared with school district and national averages. The ethnic and language minority students de-

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veloped an academic identity, formed academically oriented peer groups, and recognized the necessity of academic achievement for occupational success (Mehan, Villanueva, & Lintz, 1996).

In Houston, Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams) targets high schools with high drop-out rates, providing support and scholarships for students. The program begins preparing children for college while they are still in kindergarten; it then targets elementary and junior high schools that feed the high school. The project has resulted in higher attendance rates, reductions in teenage pregnancies, fewer disciplinary problems, and better test scores (McAdoo, 1998).

AVANCE (Spanish word meaning "to advance"), a preschool parenting program in San Antonio, has incorporated the family culture to achieve significant success with recent and second-generation Mexican immigrant families (Romo, 1999). It helps low-income, often single, mothers to provide educationally stimulating and emotionally encouraging environments for their young children. AVANCE has succeeded in reducing isolation and depression. As a result, mothers are more emotionally and verbally responsive to their children, avoid restrictive and punishing behaviors, and provide more variety in their children's daily routines (Hamburg, 1994). An added benefit is that the mothers have developed larger networks of friends, know more about community resources, and have more frequently enrolled in and completed General Educational Development (GED) courses and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes.

Mujeres y Hombres Nobles, Spanish for "honorable men and women," is a model program for students who have dropped out of the public school system. Its primary emphasis is to instill in students a sense of self-pride, including an appreciation for their culture and language. It fuses the talents and resources of East Los Angeles, helping pregnant teenagers, gang members, drug users, and juvenile offenders get back into school, off drugs, out of gangs, and into counseling. The program also invites nonprogram students and adults from the community to participate. Data for measuring long term success of the program are not yet available; however, participants report "We're showing a lot of success in just a short period of time and we know that we are already positively affecting young lives and in the future we will make a difference" (Pulido, 1995, p. 12).

Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS) focused on educating Latino youth with disabilities and high-risk Latino youth who live in urban areas (Gándara, Larson, Rumberger, & Mehan, 1998). The program emphasized psychosocial interventions as well as academic and cultural interventions. It had a positive effect on mobility, attendance, class passing rate, and graduation credits; unfortunately, when the program was discontinued, the students lost the gains they had made and failed to graduate. This is evidence that a program must be ongoing and not just a one-time intervention.

The MegaSkills Program has been the foundation for a comprehensive schoolwide reform effort at a Texas elementary school where many of the students are recent Mexican immigrants and live in colonias a few miles from the Mexico border. MegaSkills, developed by Dorothy Rich of the Home and School Institute, outlines 11 attributes and skills needed for success at school and work: confidence, motivation, effort, responsibility, perseverance, caring, initiative, teamwork, problem solving, common sense, and focus. The program has resulted in multifaceted and broad-based school improvements: test scores improved, attendance increased, behavior improved, teacher and staff morale increased, parent involvement increased, and community participation increased. Much of the success was due to the program beginning early; drawing on the talents and resources of the community; and including all teachers, staff, parents, and students, and the community (Mattox, 1999).

Implications

The research on resiliency and examples of successful resiliency programs share one common factor: community collaborative programs that recognize and capitalize on the assets and strengths of Mexican immigrant youth and their families. Mexican immigrant families have many strengths, which need to be identified. It is clear that more resiliency programs should use these strengths to foster caring relationships, active participation, increased parent-child interactions, and high expectations. Families, schools, and communities must work together to achieve this goal.

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